

Snakeheads in Virginia (Video Transcript)

John Odenkirk: I'm John Odenkirk. I'm a fisheries biologist for the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries. We are in Fairfax County just off of Route 1 – this is called Dogue Creek – this is a tributary to the Potomac River and we are doing some backpack electro-fishing surveys primarily looking for snakehead fish, northern snakeheads, but also looking for - to see what else is here.

Fish Biologist: Got a young of the year.

John Odenkirk: Potentially this fish could alter the ecosystem and would be a competitor to the space that currently the large mouth bass provides. So because of that and just the pure science issue of the fact that we got an invasive specie potentially restructuring the aquatic ecosystem, we obviously want to be able to track that even though at this point there is probably nothing we can do to stop it or maybe not even slow it down. But I think it's important that we understand what's occurring to be able to document it.

Fish Biologist: That's a big one.

John Odenkirk: This is an incredible amount of biomass, not just of snakeheads but as you can see bluegill, pumpkinseeds, and brown bullheads, killy fish, a few gizzard shad mixed in, a few crappie. Unbelievable to see this many fish packed into such a small stream.

Fish Biologist: Nice!

John Odenkirk: Some of the attributes, the physical and capability attributes of this fish were grossly overstated - some of the initial reports - you know, I think it made a great media story, the 'Franken-fish' and the walking across land and attacking small dogs - but all that, of course, is greatly over stated the movies notwithstanding. This fish does have a high capacity to tolerate poor water quality conditions and it does have some competitive advantages on fish like large mouth that are prevalent here such as a protracted or repeat spawning season, such as a dual parental guarding of the brood which might give them a competitive advantage. We're just trying to gain information about the fish, were its occurring, is the range expanding, are the densities increasing in biological characteristics about the population, growth rates, fecundity, mortality. Yeah, we are stuck with them. Even if we try to mobilize and do everything know to science and fisheries to remove these things we wouldn't even come close. If you wanted to list the attributes of a desirable food and sports fish, you look at the northern snakehead and there you go. I mean you have a fish that, based on all accounts that we've had from anglers that have caught them, hits anything that is thrown at it almost - so it doesn't show a preference for any particular bait. It hits with gusto, it fights hard, and it

tastes good. Supposedly they are fantastic eating and they are prolific and they grow fast. So it seems like this certainly could be, if you look at it for silver lining or the glass half full, that this could be a fishery that maybe at some point some will actually come to know and love and appreciate but at this point we are still concerned about the potential downside. We see, especially working in an urban area such as this in Northern Virginia, Fairfax, I work in Arlington County, Alexandria, and you'll see a lot of exotic fish like oscars or things you'd expect to see in a pet store or aquarium trade. What happens is people, either they are moving or they can't afford to feed the fish - and it's not necessarily just fish, it can be plants in an aquarium, it could be some sort of house pet in terms of a little furry creature - and they don't want to kill it but they have to do something with it so they tend to take it out to the nearest wood lot or the nearest pond or nearest stream and that's when we end up with problems. You know you look at the zebra mussels and the catastrophe and the economic damage and the millions that's caused and it doesn't take long to realize that the snakehead just is a reminder of what can happen if they are taken out of their proper place and put somewhere where they really don't belong, they haven't evolved, they haven't become adapted to that system. So that is a good reminder for everyone to kinda be careful with what they do on a personal level because things can have economic and ecological impacts.